

Westward Expansion

—by Inspector Timeline

The 1783 Treaty of Paris ending the Revolutionary War doubled the size of the new United States by adding to the original Colonies the land extending westward from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River, the Northwest Territory. The next year, a committee headed by Thomas Jefferson divided this new land into 14 states and gave them names, three of which were Assenisipia, Cherroonesus, and Metropotami. Three years later, the Northwest Ordinance (the last law written under the Articles of Confederation) encouraged settlement of these territories and, fortunately, did away with those names.

The nation doubled again 20 years later when Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase for \$15 million, adding something over 800 thousand square miles of land west of the Mississippi. Even before the deal was closed, Jefferson asked his secretary, Meriwether Lewis, and Lewis' old army buddy, William Clark, to explore the best route from the U.S. to the Pacific Ocean. With the help of an 18 year-old Shoshone girl named Sacajawea, their guide and interpreter, they made it to the mouth of the Columbia River in 1805, and the great rush to the west was on.

In the next 45 years, the U.S. added Florida, the half million square miles of the Oregon Territory, Texas, and the fruits of the Mexican-American war of 1846-48: California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming. In a not very long lifetime, the nation grew nearly tenfold, from just over 300,000 square miles to just under three million.

It was an enormous pot into which many people and their cultures could melt, but where would they come from? One source was America's birthrate (measured in terms of children reaching adulthood), which was the highest in history; four million people in 1790 became something over five million in 1800, seven million in 1810, and almost ten million by 1820.

There was nearly as great a population surge in Europe: English population rose from about seven million in 1780 to eleven and a half million in 1820. Overpopulation and bad crop years encouraged Europeans to emigrate, and it was fairly easy for them to get to the new world. An English tradesman in 1810, for example, could get free passage to Canada and make his way south if he wished. No papers were required. Or he could buy space on a ship for 10 Pounds (about \$750 in today's money), or a couple of months wages. Today, for a third of that sum, you can fly the Atlantic in a third of a day with meals, snacks, a reclining seat, and a movie. On the immigrant ship, our tradesman got a place to sleep and free water. Everything else he needed for the weeks-long voyage he had to bring aboard as a carryon. But once he got to America, he could buy rich virgin land for—by 1821—\$1.25 an acre. The minimum plot was 80 acres, so for a \$100 the new immigrant could become a free, independent farmer. Hundreds of thousands did so. Many more did so after the Homestead Act of 1862 provided 160 absolutely free acres to every western settler who qualified. And the discovery of gold in California in 1848 did nothing to slow the occupation of the American West.

“Go West, young man,” wrote *Terre Haute Express* editor John Soule in 1851, “and grow up with the country.” ♦

Guiding Questions:

Why did people head west?

What were some of the challenges they faced?

How did westward expansion affect Native Americans?

Examine the Facts worksheet:

In this table students are asked to organize information they have learned about five different groups of settlers. This table will help students compare the motives, destinations, and challenges faced by different groups of people who headed west.